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Spring 2004 Knight Award for writing exercises

Instructor: Erik Harms

Course: Anthro183, "Freedom and Control"

Writing Exercise: "Passing out to the Sound of the Passive Voice"

This simple writing assignment, when combined with in-class discussions and out of class observations about social and cultural control, works wonders to offer students a take-home reason why they should resist passive constructions in their writing. The handout on the passive voice argues that they should avoid the passive voice because it will use them. The handout encourages them to activate their consciousness. The same applies to the way we analyze social and cultural control. We seek out and describe actions and actors who deploy social and cultural mechanisms of control to coerce and constrain the actions of others. To do this well, we have to use the active voice in our writing. This produces good social science at the same time that it livens up student writing. The take-home message tells students that good research and conscious attention to the actors and actions in will make it easy to produce readable essays that refer to the real world rather than to heady abstractions.

The basic in-class method used to teach this is quite simple. We make lists of different elements of social and cultural control on the board. Then we go through and identify all the actors and actions involved. Then we make active sentences out of them. The process reveals the assumptions students often make about power and control by highlighting how often they forget to identify who actually does what to whom. This beautifully leads into a discussion of why people often resort to the passive voice – because they don't think clearly about who does what to whom. The parallels between both exercises become clear and the whole idea of active writing makes sense as a consciousness-raising exercise rather than a pedantic discussion of "what sounds nice".

Passing Out to the Sound of the Passive Voice

Let me share something that was taught to me. School is where I went in order to be taught the fantastic notion that better writing is something that can be learned. It was there that I was introduced to new techniques by teachers that could be used to improve my writing. My skills were greatly improved and many lessons were learned. One such lesson is the **passive voice**.

When I was in school, my teachers introduced me to the fantastic notion that I could actually learn to write better. Of all the lessons and techniques my teachers taught me, I gained the most from a lesson on how and when to avoid the **passive voice**.

What do these two passages say? Why and how do they say it differently? What does the **passive voice** have to do with the difference?

The passive voice can turn active writing into dull, passive, and dry writing. Writers who rely upon it often substitute clarity and force for vagueness and imprecision. Among readers, prolonged exposure to the passive voice may lead to drowsiness, confusion, occasional dizzy spells, and at its worst, to passing out. Why? What makes a sentence active or passive?

Like an active human being who does something to something, **in an active sentence the main subject performs the main action of the sentence**. The subject uses the verb to do what it wants to do. As in passive humans who have things done to them, **in a passive sentence the action is done on the subject**. The verb uses the subject.

So... Don't be used! Let your subjects take control of their verbs. Students of the world unite! Break the chains of passive writing! Make your subjects active agents in the written world you create!

Let's look at a few more examples:

PASSIVE: The player was scolded for shouting at the goalie.

(This sentence never tells us who scolded the player. The "was scolded" in the sentence refers to the actions of an unidentified subject.)

ACTIVE: The referee scolded the player for shouting at the goalie.

PASSIVE: There were many students who decided to leave campus early.

ACTIVE: Many students decided to leave campus early.

(In the second sentence we gain clarity and use fewer words. The point sticks.)

Of course, writers may choose to use the passive voice in certain situations. (It *is* English). For example, you may wish to emphasize the subject by placing it at the beginning of the sentence. The sentence, "The passive voice is overused," may provide a striking introduction to a chapter on the passive voice because it places the subject at the beginning. But then you have to use another sentence to explain who overuses it. In any event, when you write, you should pay attention to the passive voice, understand what you gain or lose by using it, and actively decide when and why you use it. As you write, keep an eye out for what action occurs in your sentences, and ask yourself: "who is doing the acting?" With this in mind, you can use the passive voice when you feel fit to do so. But don't let it use you!

Assignment 2a: What is Social Control? A list. (Monday, February 9th, due Wednesday, February 11th)

In class today (Monday), we discussed the concept of social control. This was reflected in the week's readings on the caste system in India, Max Weber's discussion of the types of social action, and our general discussion of how social control works. We began by making an in-class list of elements of social control.

I would now like you to continue this list by collecting at least five and preferably ten examples of social control evident in the world around you. When you make your list be careful to identify: (1) the mechanism of control; (2) the actors involved in enforcing the control (if you don't know, put down your own hypothesis); (3) what or who the mechanism seeks to control. For each example create an active sentence that describes this mechanism of control.

Mechanism of Control	Actors doing the controlling	What or who is being controlled.
Stoplight	Ithaca Police Dept.	Erratic and dangerous driving. Random pedestrian traffic. (But this seems to fail at intersections in Collegetown).
Point system for grades in my writing seminar.	That scoundrel Erik.	My plans for the weekend.
2 mile fence around the center of Washington DC.	??? Washington DC Police Dept.	"Anarchist behavior" Free-speech ???

Active sentence: While the Ithaca Police Department uses stoplights at the intersections in Collegetown to control erratic and dangerous driving, it fails to control random pedestrian traffic.

Assignment 2b: What is Social Control? Reflections on your list. (1 page. Assigned Wednesday, February 11th, due Monday, February 16th)

During today's in-class writing you took a few moments to try and devise a definition of Social Control. Now take some time this weekend to:

- Write a one-page essay explaining your own understanding of social control. Use and revise the definition you came up with in class and illustrate this with poignant examples from your list of social controls, or from the list we created in class (**due Monday, February 16th**).

Assignment 2c: What is cultural Control? (2 pages; Assigned on Monday, due Wednesday)

In class today (Monday), we became familiar with the concept of cultural control. This was reflected in the week's readings. Like we did with social control in the previous week, we then made an in-class list of elements of cultural control.

I would now like you to collect five to ten examples of cultural control evident in the world around you. Follow the same format we used in the previous essay exercise on Social Control.

Cultural Mechanism of Control	Actors doing the controlling	What or who is being controlled.
Disregard for stoplights	Pedestrians in heavily populated student areas.	Random pedestrian traffic seems to defy the “rule” of the stoplight. Pedestrians assert right of way via the principle of “strength in numbers” at certain intersections and successfully control drivers who must often wait at green lights.
Harmony is more important than serious discussion	Social groups, dispute resolution agencies, divorce courts... etc.	True debate about complicated subjects is often silenced by the need to “reach consensus”. Anger about personal issues is discounted and made to seem inappropriate. -Those who disagree are silenced if they do not join the popular consensus.
Shooting an elephant	Colonial officer and “the natives”	In order to live up to the expectations required of one who is in control of a group of people, the officer has to kill the elephant he doesn’t want to kill. He is controlled by the very entailments associated with the act of maintaining control.

The exercise for this assignment consists of two parts: a simple list with accompanying active sentences, and a one-page essay explaining how you might define cultural control as well as how it differs from social control. Use examples from your list to illustrate this point. **(due Wednesday, February 18th).**